

## HEALTH MATTERS

# Neurodiversity: Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Neurodiversity refers to a range of conditions including Autism, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, and ADHD. It relates to the different ways the brain can work and interpret information. This note explores the impact of Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

### Key takeaways for HR professionals:

- > Autism is a hidden disability, so you can't always tell that someone has autism.
- > Not everyone is diagnosed with autism in childhood.
- > While autism is not curable, the right support can make enormous differences to peoples' lives.
- > Neurodiverse individuals can bring a range of skills to the workplace, for example, they can be very creative. Other recognised talents or attributes include honesty, reliability, analytical abilities, logical thinking, intelligence and the ability to undertake repetitive tasks.
- > Supportive adjustments do not need to be expensive or complicated. Talk to your employee to find out what they think will assist them at work.
- > Occupational health can provide you with further guidance. This may including recommending a referral to a specialist service for bespoke workplace advice.

# 1. Autism in the workplace

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder. It is present from birth, although it may not manifest itself until later in life. It affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people and the world around them.

It is a spectrum disorder, so while people with autism may share certain symptoms, their condition will affect them in very different ways.

Autism is much more common than most people think. There are around **700,000** autistic people in the UK - that's more than **1 in 100** (estimated prevalence **1.1%**). People from all nationalities, cultures, religions and social backgrounds can be autistic, although it appears to affect more men than women. A study in 2016 estimated that **16%** of autistic people were in full time work and **32%** are in some kind of paid work.



There are around **700,000** autistic people in the UK – more than **1 in 100**.

## Challenges associated with autism

### 'Triad of social difficulties'

- > Social Communication. This may include difficulties with phrases such as 'break a leg' which can be taken literally. Employees may also have difficulty interpreting body language, facial expressions, jokes and sarcasm.
- > Social Interaction. This may include difficulty with eye contact as well as recognising and understanding emotions. People with autism may seem disinterested in others and prefer to be alone.
- > Social Imagination. This can include difficulty understanding and interpreting other people's thoughts and feelings or predicting peoples' behaviour or what will happen next. It can also present difficulty with preparing for the future and planning for change and coping in unfamiliar situations.

### Additional difficulties

- > They may have restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities and often like rules and routines.
- > They may have sensory sensitivities such as to light or taste-this may be over or under sensitivity.
- > Intellectual ability can vary, extending from profound impairment to superior.



Around **16% of people** with autism are in full time work and **32%** are in some kind of paid work.



Autism appears to **affect more** men than women



Autism affects people from **all** nationalities, cultures, religions and social backgrounds.

## 2. Helping people with autism in the workplace

- Clarify expectations of the job.
- Provide training and monitoring.
- Ensure instructions are concise and specific.
- Ask about sensory distractions.
- Ensure the work environment is reasonably adjusted to meet an individual's needs.
- Regularly review performance.
- Provide reassurance in stressful situations.
- If permission to disclose the condition is given, make other staff aware of potential impacts.
- Support your staff member to prepare for any change.

### Managing change

People with autism can find coping with change difficult

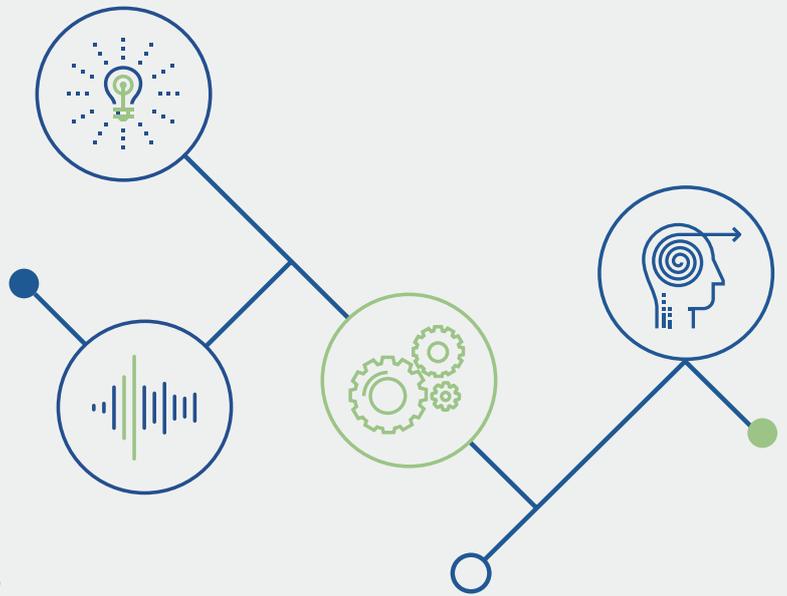
- > Give as much advanced notice of any changes to processes and routines.
- > Take time to clearly explain changes, consider one-to-one meeting to explain plans.
- > Write down important information and send a follow up email.
- > Plan regular check in meetings to assess how they are faring.

### Social interaction & communication

The following strategies may be helpful to consider

- > Say what you mean. Be clear, concise and avoid abstract language.
- > Provide direct feedback but ensure its given sensitively and try to deal with any workplace issues promptly.
- > Try to keep instructions simple.
- > Be aware of the potential for issues around saying the 'wrong' thing or seeming 'uninterested' when speaking to people. This is probably unintentional and is likely to be due to the person's communication difficulties, where appropriate remind other colleagues of this.
- > You may need to provide a sensitive reminder of boundaries, for example, if they tend to interrupt conversations.
- > Consider the potential benefit of a 'buddy' or workplace mentor who can meet them regularly and provide support.





### 3. Other considerations

- Be mindful of noise levels within the office. Some people benefit from having a fixed desk in a quiet area or the use of noise cancelling headphones or a screen around their desk.
- Consider adjusting light levels and room temperature where necessary.
- Some people benefit from having access to a private office or meeting room and a relaxation space.
- Flexible working can be helpful. For example, homeworking and / or being able to work when others are not in the office. Equally, some may benefit from fixed rather than variable shifts.
- Extra breaks can be helpful if their environment is over-stimulating.

### Advice for Managers

- > Look out for anxiety. While autism is not a mental health condition, autistic people can experience issues like anxiety, just like anyone else. Consider access to mental health support, such as talking therapies, access to coaching as well as relaxation and mindfulness techniques.
- > If your autistic employee consents to their condition being disclosed, then providing colleagues with information and guidance on autism can benefit everyone. Sometimes the employee may find it helpful to write a document for other staff explaining what their colleagues can do to support them. You could also consider if there is a need for additional staff training.
- > Remember that some individuals may have undiagnosed autism. Be alert to the possibility in employees who may be struggling if they show any signs/symptoms as above.
- > Referral to occupational health can assist you to support your employee.

### Further sources of information

<https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/employers/information-for-employers/managing.aspx>